

Archives Towards Future History



If one wants to study all the records kept in the National Archives of India it would require several births! Records are not mere bundles of documents but our heritage. India has entered the new millennium with this 'heritage' and to understand its nuances of history and the future history Dr. Gautam Chatterjee talks to the Director General of National Archives of India Dr. Sukumar Sarkar in an exclusive interview for Discover India.

GC: As Director General National Archives how do you look at the history of Archives itself?

SS: Prior to 1860 organized Archives were meant for official transactions. Since the East India Company days many records were created but remained in very sad state. There was little awareness about preservation of records and none thought of infrastructure, storage and day to day affairs. After 1860, with the

Auditor General Report commonly known as 'Sandman Report', the British government started giving it a serious thought. Classification and systematization of century old records was initiated and, finally, in March 1891, the Imperial Record Department was created and G.W. Forest, a scholar historian of Bombay Elphinstone College, took over charge. Being a scholar and now as record keeper he completed the systematic upkeeping of records

which were created over though his main business was to organize records for official use. But soon under Forest it became the primary source of Modern India. And the sources are inherited by Archives of India.

GC: From which year did you start systematic records of National Archives and what is the history

SS: Records are from 1748 onward. Though there are many older documents and scripts like Sharda, Ilgit etc. Today there are some 35 lakh files and around one lakh oriental records. If one keeps it in linear form it would approximately cover around 60 km of shelf space. The unique library of 'historical' books is another attraction, and there are around 2 lakh rare books, albums and manuscripts.

GC: It is understood the Archives as a large quantity of maps and it is commonly said those cannot be copied for security reasons. Will you kindly explain?

SS: Yes, there are around 40 thousands maps available in our archives. And some we have recently retrieved which are being catalogued. And coming to the second part of your question: maps which are of sensitive areas like border areas, be it old, we cannot provide access because we would require clearance from the Ministry of Home, External Affairs and Survey of India. Moreover, historical maps, even without 'scale', can create controversy and 'misinterpretations'. To avoid such a situation certain maps are not given to scholars unless special permission is granted by the agencies I have mentioned earlier. Otherwise, common maps are accessible and we do supply copies of those to scholars provided they have permits!

GC: In the last fifty years what has been the total number of scholars who have accessed records for the purpose of research?

SS: Around 30,000 scholars from world over had come to the Archives to consult records which includes world renowned historians from the West.

GC: The National Archives advises government organizations to upkeep records. But today most of the top management is working on computers and if no print-outs are kept of decisions at various levels then tomorrow NAI would not have those records. How do you see this problem?

SS: Excepting a few Ministries the computer is not much in use. Public utility services like the Railways do send information data that can go on.

Even computerization for scholar's information in the Archives is also very relevant.

GC: Do you mean that computerization of total archival records is being planned?

SS: No. I will not suggest digitalize Archives. The guide and reference routes like Indices to archival records can be computerized. And material of cultural importance and International appeal can be computerized as well, barring the sensitive ones.

GC: Coming back again there are some organizations where computer working is in vogue, so how do you control those?

SS: Only reference data should be computerized and not the text of decisions or arriving at decisions. Because, with the paper the accountability remains and signature tells 'nothing but the truth'. On the other hand computerized decisions are not authenticated and transfers the total information onto a floppy in an unauthorized manner. So stringent implementations of office procedures should come to the fore and this is so especially of policy matters and sensitive subjects.

GC: In Western countries Archives initiate a document and handle it till the end of the work. Whereas in India, Archives comes at the last especially when some 'bureaucrat' realizes the historical importance of some document! How do you react to this?

SS: Yes, the Archives should be involved in the 'Record in Making' process, which is yet to be done. However, on the score of Records Management, the Archives do train personnel and guide all departments to evaluate the document in proper historical light and classification be done about the 'life term' of records. Like some important records are generally classified as 'B Keep' which is kept for 25 years and then can be transferred to the National Archives.

GC: But again an archivist's job is a specialization and they should be involved right from the beginning of 'record making' process.

SS: Yes!

GC: Then who will initiate the process?

SS: Government has to initiate it because this is a policy matter.

GC: But who would train an archivist except your School of Archival studies?

SS: Well! School of Archival Studies conducts Diploma courses apart from short-term courses on Records Management and Preservation. But recently Jabalpur University has introduced archival studies in their academic curriculum. It is hoped that in the near future other Universities will follow suit.

GC: Does your school train foreign students also?

SS: Yes, every year we admit foreign students to get training in Archival Science and our Institute commands prestige internationally.

GC: Coming to another aspect of Archives we find suddenly an openness as you have brought out Historical Post Cards, and organize national and international exhibitions and now you have opened an Archival Museum. From where did you get this inspiration?

SS: Archives heritage is the concept. The Archives is not only for serious scholars and historians. The common man should also have glimpses of this huge heritage. And hence the Archives Museum.

GC: This is real openness and this should be followed by other spheres of progress like the concept of Electronics Archives. Will you kindly explain that?

SS: Yes this is the age of user friendly electronic Archives and we are thinking of utilizing multi media to create reference of records but not the contents of the files or Mss. However, keeping in view prevailing conditions we have to tailor-make a system which suits our India. In the near future we are planning to have a Web-site to bring to the notice of global audience the enormous holding we have. This will help to attract scholars worldwide to come and experience the records and interpret history for the next millennium.